Threat induced racial stereotypes in domestic violence situations

Senior Research Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation with Distinction in Psychology in the Undergraduate Colleges of The Ohio State University

By

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April, 2018

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Abstract

The role of motivation in stereotyping has been studied extensively (Kunda & Spencer, 2003), and has also recently been examined in conjunction with self-image threat (Spencer et al., 1998). In the following study, participant's sense of self was either threatened or not using a social exclusion manipulation. They were then shown a video of an ostensible domestic dispute. Perception of the arguer's faces was assessed using reverse correlation image classification. The composite images from each condition were rated and the data suggests that the threat female image was seen as significantly more white, and almost significantly more passive than its non-threat female counterpart. This shows evidence of threat inducing stereotypes about the victim in this circumstance, with implications for how victims are perceived within the criminal justice system and by the general public.

Introduction

On the evening of May 15th, 2010, 16-year-old Kalief Browder was arrested in the Bronx for allegedly stealing a backpack. Browder maintained his innocence, but was still charged with robbery, grand larceny, and assault with a set bail of $3000, an unaffordable amount for him and his family. He was placed on a correctional facility bus headed to Riker's Island where he would spend three years simply waiting for trial, until charges were dropped. He survived multitudes of beatings from both other inmates and correctional officers in the facility, spent a total of 2 years in solitary confinement, and suffered from paranoia and severe anxiety and depression that led to him attempting suicide on multiple occasions. Even after he returned home, he spent time rotating in and out of mental health facilities until two years after his release, at age 22, when he completed suicide at his family home (Gonnerman, 2017).

While Browder's story is more extreme than most, it also illustrates a key issue. Whether or not the alleged victim, Roberto Bautista, actually thought that Browder had stolen his backpack, his eyewitness statement was taken as enough proof to charge and send a 16-year-old to one of the worst jails in America. But why was one person's eyewitness identification seen as more proof than Browder's own refusal? A number of studies have shown that people tend to believe witnesses, even when they waver under court questioning (Lindsay, Wells, & O'Connor, 1989; Wells & Leippe, 1981; Wells, Lindsay, & Ferguson, 1979) and that their testimony carries a lot of weight in court decision making (Loftus, 1974). This assumption we make to believe eyewitness testimony is concerning, especially when there are so many other factors involved that could be causing misidentification of perpetrators. Much research has illustrated the ease with which our

memories of events can be biased (Loftus & Palmer, 1974). Another factor that could be causing misidentification is eyewitness bias. One area that is particularly vulnerable to eyewitness bias surrounding a crime is race. Mistaken identifications are more likely to occur when the perpetrator is a different race than the eyewitness (Meissner & Brigham, 2001). In fact, according to the Innocence Project, of the 70% of exonerated cases that involved eyewitness misidentification, 41% of those cases were a cross-racial misidentification (2017). Across social psychological research, this is commonly referred to as the Cross Race Effect, and has been shown in empirical studies to have direct implications on eyewitness identification (Wilson & Hugenberg, 2013). Oftentimes, when it comes to criminal activity, black males are thought of as more aggressive and likely to commit crimes than their white counterparts (Duncan, 1976; Ryan, Judd & Park, 1996). These effects are also seen across different categories of crime and the perceived stereotypicality of perpetrators. In a study conducted by Osborne & Davies (2013), more stereotypical black faces are often associated more with more stereotypical black crimes, and this in turn effects participants' memory of the perpetrator in a "stereotype-consistent manner".

The issue of racial stereotyping in crime can also be applied to victims involved. Generally speaking, black victims of crime are perceived as having fewer positive traits than white victims (Murray & Stahly, 1987). While this is certainly an issue, it becomes more difficult to assess based on the wide breadth of crime and criminal activity that occurs. One area of crime with one of the most complex victim-offender relationships is in domestic violence situations. These instances differ from other types of crime in multiple contexts: where they commonly occur, how they are handled by police, and the close

relationship of the victim and offender. These factors also have a direct impact on law enforcement decisions in reported domestic violence cases, leading to criticism of leniency towards offenders throughout the criminal justice process (Belknap, 1995; Buzawa & Buzawa, 2002; Koss, 2000; Oppenladder, 1982; Felson & Pare, 2007). Based upon how race is viewed in the criminal justice system, if perceiver's expectancies about the victim includes race, it is more likely that negative racial stereotypes will be detrimental to black victims of domestic violence (Harrison & Esqueda, 1999; Willis, Hallinan, & Melby, 1996) causing them to be taken less seriously or even blamed for their victimization.

Ultimately, our identification of a potential criminal rests on our mental image of their appearance. Therefore, if any other factor can cause these perceptions to be biased, it is a large problem. To keep ourselves from applying these stereotypes, however, the stereotypic attitude can still be activated, and there must be a lack of motivation and opportunity to keep ourselves from applying it (Fazio, 1990). In Gilbert & Hixon's 1991 study, it was demonstrated that under high cognitive load, participants were less likely to activate stereotypes. However, Spencer et al. (1998) found that upon having self-image threatened, cognitive load has no effect on stereotype activation. Threat to self-image exacerbates activation, so in situations where participants wouldn't normally apply stereotypes, they did. Threat to self also offers motivation to apply said stereotype as a way to make ourselves feel better (Fein & Spencer, 1997). Derogation of outgroup members after having ones self-image threatened (across any domain, not only related domains), actually substantially increases self-esteem.

In the present study, we examined how threat effects mental representations of people in a presumed domestic violence situation. To threaten self-image, we used social

exclusion in the form of a game called Cyberball (Williams, Cheung & Choi, 2000), and then examined participant's mental representations using reverse correlation image classification (Dotsch, Wigboldus, Langner, & van Knippenberg, 2008).

Methods

Participants

30 total students were recruited to participate in this study. Participants were all undergraduate students enrolled in the introductory Psychology course at The Ohio State University. Participants received 1 hour of REP course credit as compensation for their time. All participants were White, Non-Hispanic students above the age of 18.

Procedure

Participants gave verbal consent prior to the start of the experiment according to Ohio State IRB standards. Each participant had their own headphones, and was separated from other participants by partitions between computer stations to ensure privacy in responses.

Threat Manipulation

Prior to beginning the experiment, each participant was randomly assigned to a threat (T) or no-threat (NT) condition. Since the experiment was run with up to three people at a time, condition was kept the same for participants run in the same session. Every participant received the same instruction that the present task examined visualization, and to read the instructions listed on their screen prior to beginning the game. They then began by playing a game of Cyberball. In the threat condition, participants began playing a virtual game of catch with two other individuals. Participants were initially included in the game, but eventually the other players exclude the participant, only throwing the ball back and forth between them. In the no-

threat condition, participants played the same game of virtual catch with two other individuals and were included equally, with catching and throwing neutrally decided by the software.

All participants were informed that other people playing were not in the same room or building, when in fact each was a simulation.

Target Stimulus Video

After playing Cyberball, all participants were instructed to watch a video and to pay attention to remember the details for questions occurring directly afterwards. In the video, a couple approaches the front door of an apartment. They are wearing heavy coats and scarves, which mostly obscure their faces. Their neighbor, off-screen, calls hello to the couple, identifying them as "Sarah" and "John," but they do not respond. Then the video cuts to the neighbor, entering her apartment, and sitting down on the couch. The video stays centered on her the rest of the time, as a muffled argument is audible in the background, presumably from the apartment next door where Sarah and John are. Their argument centers on Sarah buying an expensive birthday present for a longtime male friend, whom John had previously mentioned he did not want her to see anymore, and gets progressively louder. On screen, the neighbor is seen to be growing increasingly concerned. The argument ends with a crashing sound from next door and the video subject looking alarmed.

Reverse Correlation

To measure the effect of threat on the two people involved in the domestic dispute (John and Sarah), we used a reverse correlation task. In reverse correlation, participants are shown a series of facial stimuli. Each stimulus created is an image of the same face (otherwise known as a 'base face') that has a unique visual noise pattern superimposed on it; this noise slightly changes the appearance of the face, creating a unique stimulus. In each trial, two stimuli are presented

simultaneously and participants select which one they believe is the best representation of a dimension they have been instructed to evaluate (e.g. which image is more similar to how you imagined John to look). The selected images from all trials are then averaged together to create a composite image. This composite serves as an approximation of participants' mental representation of whatever dimension they are evaluating.

Reverse Correlation Task

Stimuli for this study included 400 stimuli for each gender, the original image and it's inverse noise pattern in each of 200 trials.

In this particular study, participants took part in a reverse correlation task for each interlocutor in the argument, John and Sarah. In the first task, participants were instructed to select the image that looked more like John (the next-door neighbor assumed to be involved in the next door dispute). Prior to images appearing for each trial, a fixation cross would appear on the screen for 500 milliseconds. Then, two images would appear (a reverse classification stimulus and the inverted stimulus) and participants would select which image they thought looked more like John's face by hitting either the left or right arrow key. They repeated this through 200 trials. The second reverse correlation task followed the same procedure, however in this iteration participants were asked to select the images they thought looked most like Sarah.

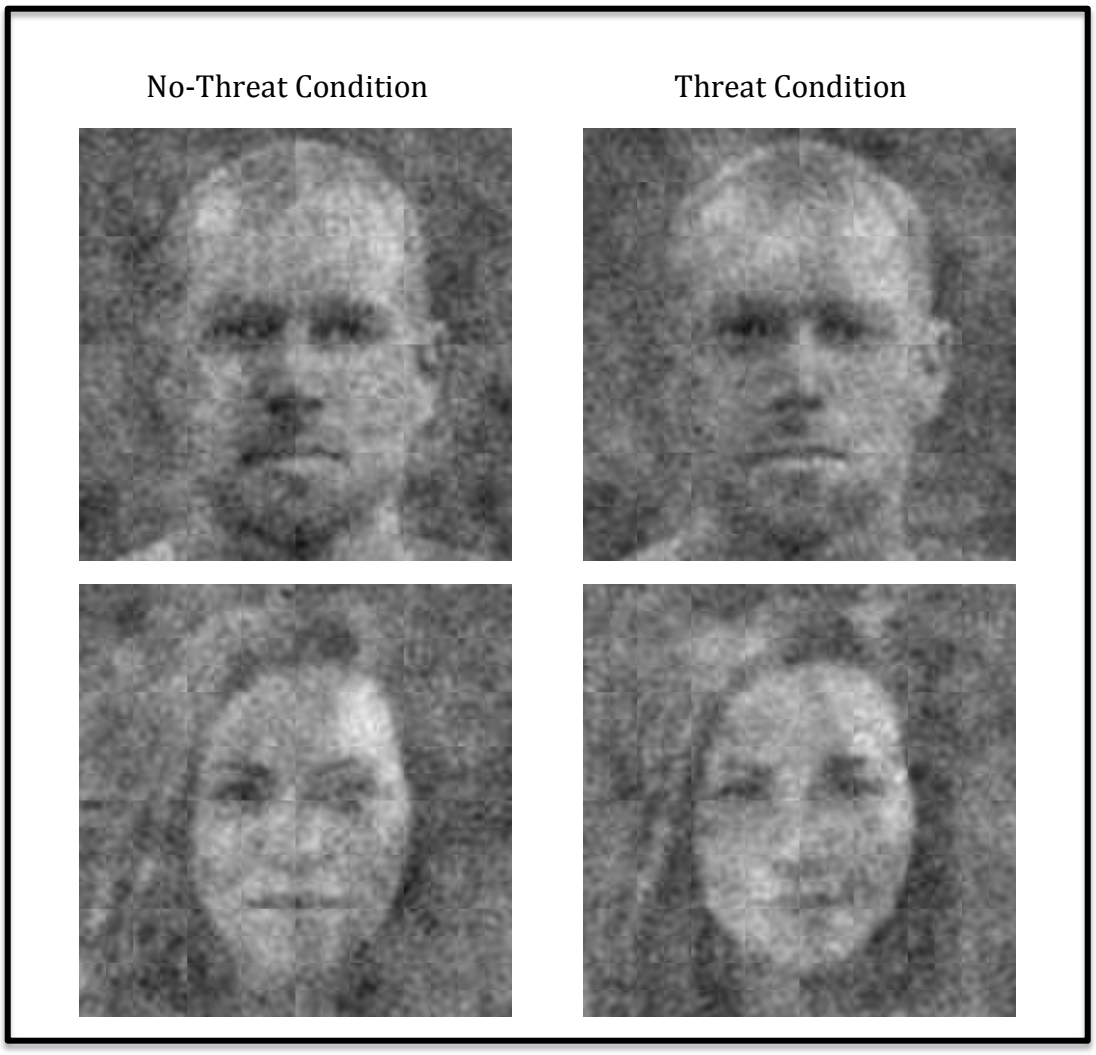
Results

All data from the 30 undergraduate REP students was used, with 16 in the threat condition and 14 in the control, or no-threat, condition.

Reverse Correlation

To examine what the original participants thought both the male and female in the couple looked like, the images generated by the reverse correlation task were averaged to

create composite images for both John and Sarah in each condition. The noise patterns from each trial were averaged across conditions, and then reapplied to the base image to generate these composites. These images are an approximation of the average mental representation for John and Sarah's faces for participants in each condition.

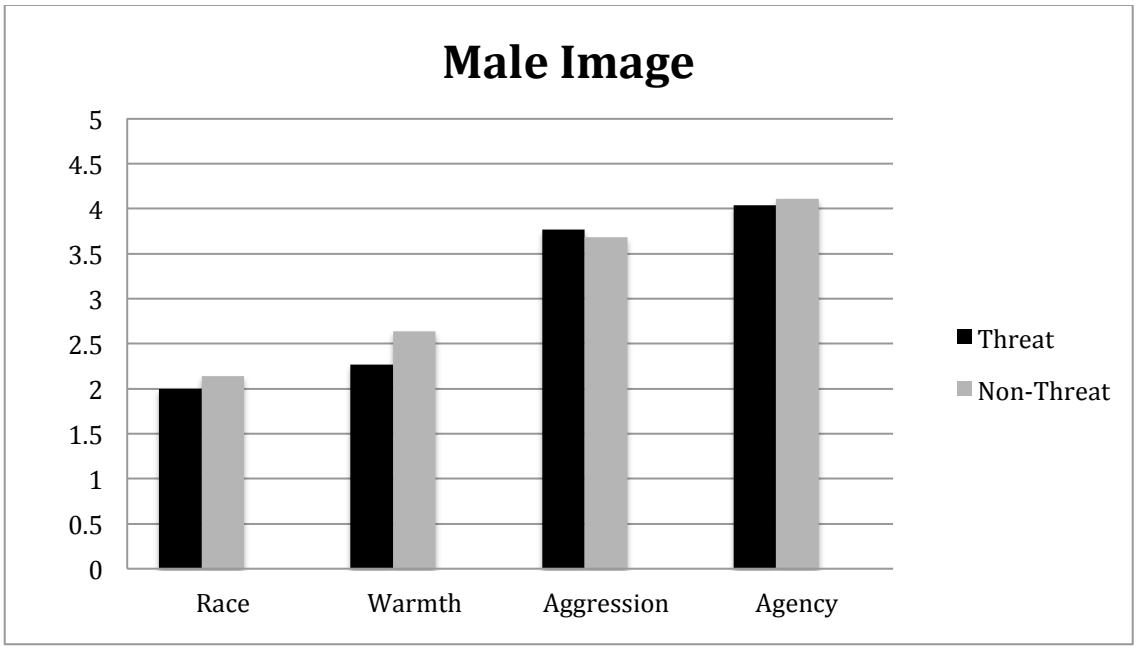


To estimate the effect of the threat on participant's mental representation of John and Sarah's faces, these batch images were presented to a group of 54 naïve, third party raters on Amazon Mechanical Turk for evaluation. Participants at this stage saw none of the prior study, including the video or the reverse correlation trials; they were only presented

with one male image and one female image. The image condition of each was randomized so they were only presented with two images, one for each person. Participants were asked to evaluate across four factors for each image: stereotypicality of race (1 = Very White to 5 = Very Black), warmth (1 = Very Cold to 5 = Very Warm), aggression (1 = Very Passive to 5 = Very Aggressive), and agency (1 = Very Submissive to 5 = Highly Assertive).

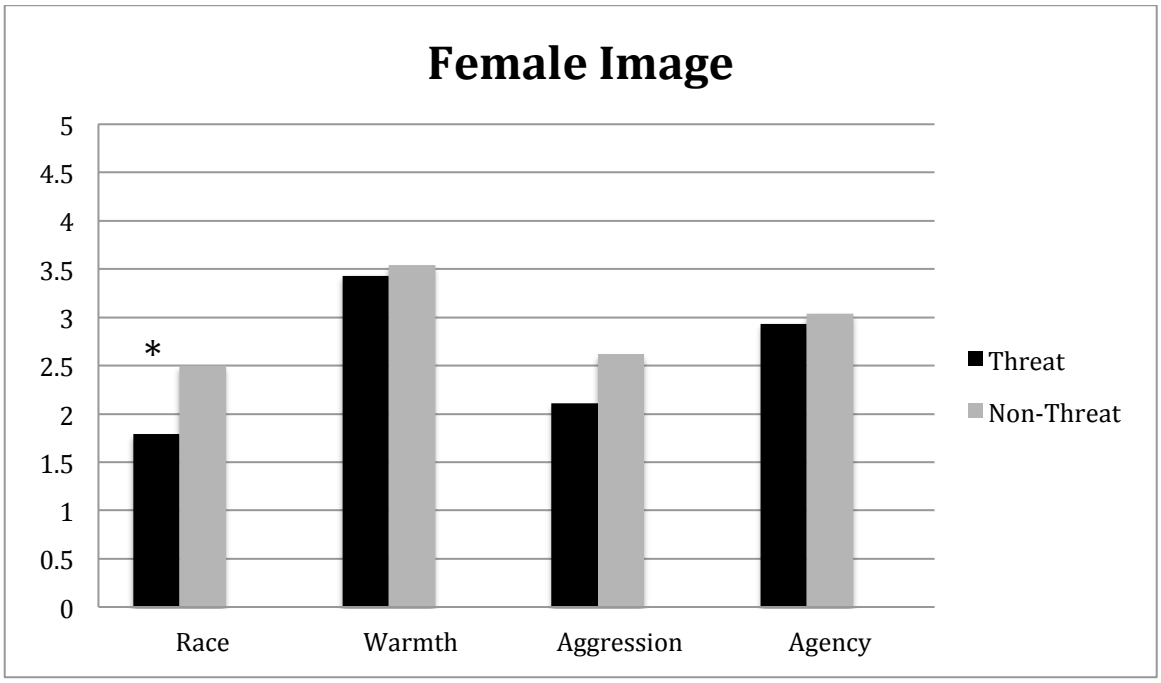
A between samples t-test was conducted to examine if there were significant differences between these traits and in the different image conditions. Two participant's data were excluded from MTurk ratings due to incompletion of the survey.

For the male images, there were no significant results across stereotypicality of race (M_T= 2.0, M_{NT}= 2.14, t(50.086)= .506, p= .6153), warmth (M_T= 2.27, M_{NT}= 2.64, t(48.947)=1.237, p= .222), aggression (M_T= 3.77, M_{NT}= 3.68, t(51.677)= - .367, p= .715) or agency (M_T= 4.04, M_{NT}= 4.11, t(51.282)= .316, p= .7534).



For the Sarah images, we did find significant results for stereotypicality of race (M_T=1.79, M_{NT}= 2.5, t(47.633)= 2.396, p< .05) and a trend towards significance for

aggression, (M_T= 2.11, M_{NT}= 2.62, t(46.506)= 1.906, p= .0628). Warmth (M_T= 3.43, M_{NT}=3.54, t(51.828)= .4164, p= .6788) and agency (M_T= 2.93, M_{NT}= 3.04, t(51.997)= .3623, p= .7186) were both non-significant results. This suggests that participant's mental representations of Sarah's face were more white and more passive in the threat condition in comparison to the control condition Sarah.



Discussion

In this study, we examined how threat to self-image would affect participant's mental representations of both a male and female involved in a presumed domestic dispute.

Further study into how threat effects stereotyping and mental representations in a domestic violence situation is still needed. Replication of the present study with a larger initial sample size, and one that examines the demographics of participants in relation to

how they view both the victim and perpetrator would possibly yield different results, and potentially show an effect on how victim stereotypes contribute to perpetrator treatment.

In addition, having a less ambiguous domestic violence situation, or one in which some of the uncertainty could be removed may influence this as well. Perhaps being able to insert more detail into a story rather than only watching a video and hearing an argument would yield different results and stronger expressions of disparity.

Though there was no difference between threat conditions, the male image in both conditions was viewed as aggressive and more agentic. This could simply be a reflection of gender norms rather than the domestic situation itself, however.

While we did not see the effect of male racial stereotypes about the male that we hypothesized would exist, our findings about the female show a more notable effect: in situations of threat the female face appeared significantly more white and more passive.

What impact could stereotypes of white, passive female victims have though? According to research conducted by The Bureau of Justice Statistics (1995), when controlling for socioeconomic status, prevalence of domestic violence is equal for white and black women. However, according to other research, stereotypes of black women as loud, stubborn, aggressive, and argumentative (Weitz & Gordon, 1993) are inconsistent with the stereotypical notion of battered women as helpless and passive (Walker, 1979). Violation of these traditional notions could very well lead to negative bias towards black women as domestic violence victims, and even cause them to be seen as contributors to their own victimization (Harrison & Willis Esqueda, 1999). Because black battered women do not fit the stereotypes shown by participants in this study, it is a distinct possibility that they

could be ignored or treated more negatively even after reporting. It could also very well be a contribution to the rate of high case attrition seen across the US (Stalans & Finn, 1995).

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